

John Dickens  
ORGANIZING TOOLS • LEAF B

HORTICULTURE MAGAZINE NOV 2006

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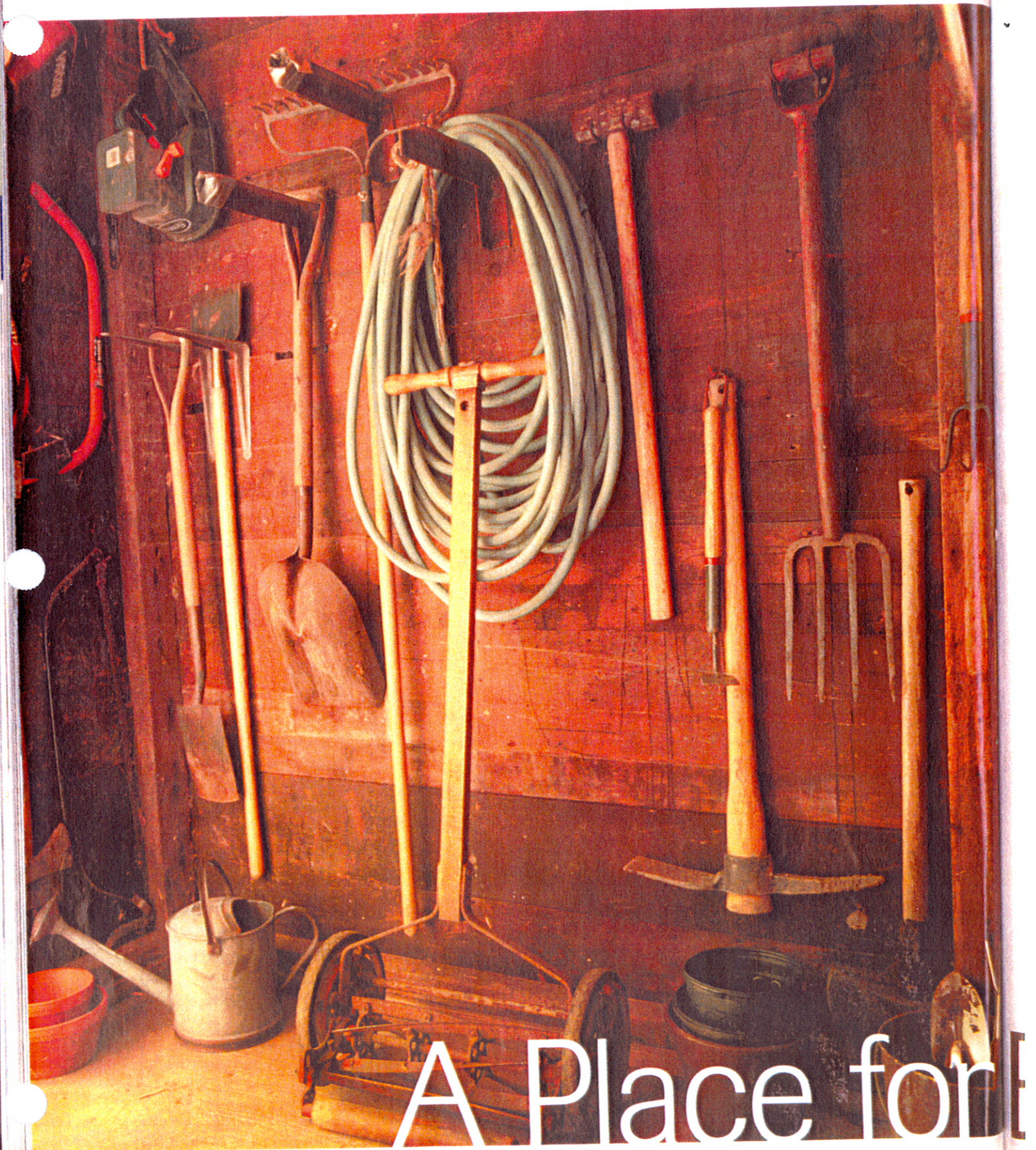
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## Tool Shed



A Place for

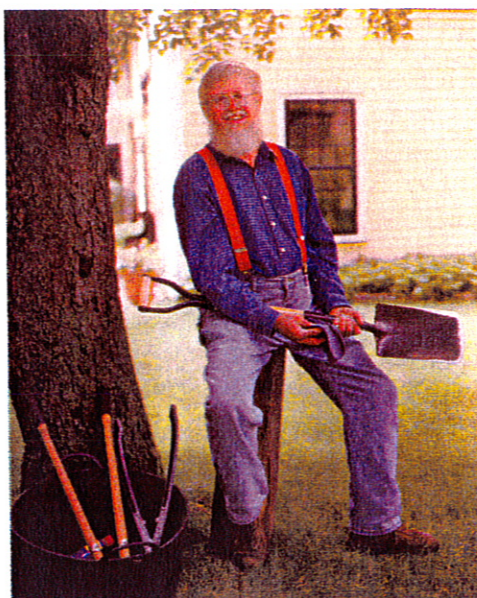


Nature abhors a vacuum, my father the chemist liked to announce, explaining the mysterious disappearance of any free space in the tool shed. We might clear a section of floor, but we'd find the space filled in again almost as soon as we turned our backs.

Busy lives and a short growing season conspire to create a mess that, by summer's end, makes any prospect of returning the car to the garage downright laughable. Of course, cars don't really need to be garaged anymore. But every tool shed benefits from an annual cleaning, ideally done between the fall of the last leaf and the fall of the first snowflake. Admittedly, in some places, that can be a brief window of opportunity, but your goal is modest. You aren't out to actually empty the shed, but rather to attend to its various contents, which are most likely to be...

#### HAND TOOLS

These are the gardener's most permanent possessions, but only if they are cared for. First and foremost this means gathering them up at the end of the season (if not at the end of every day). Start by cleaning every metal surface. Soil left on a shovel blade will be underlaid by a patch of rust come



spring. So scrape and scrub away. Use water if necessary, and once the surface has dried, coat the bare metal with a layer of spray lubricant, such as WD-40.

Pruners, loppers, and hedge shears should all be rounded up and sharpened with a whetstone. (If not now, when?) And while you are at it, dress the edges of shovels and hoes with a bastard mill file or a bench grinder. Sharpness is nice in any tool, even a blunt-edged one. (See box, page 53.)

Short-handled tools like trowels, hand hoes, scratchers, and weeder can be stored together in a box or bin. Long-handled tools, however, are best hung up. First, because the floor will invariably get wet during the winter, causing the tip of the tool to rust, and second, because otherwise someone will step on the tines of an iron rake and whack himself in the head with the handle. Hardware stores offer a host of tool-hanging devices if you want something more elegant than simply hammering nails into the wall.

#### POWER TOOLS

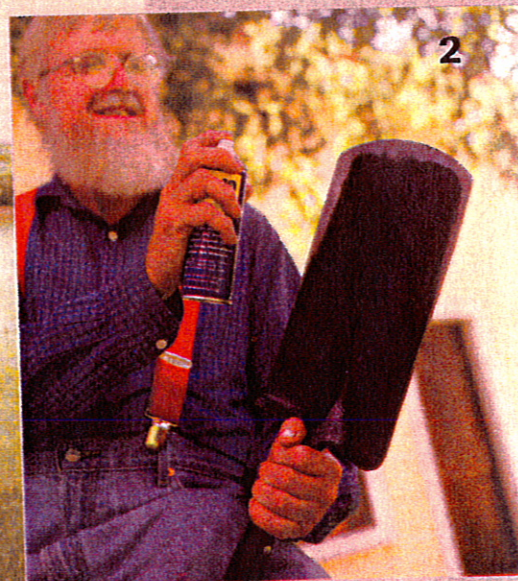
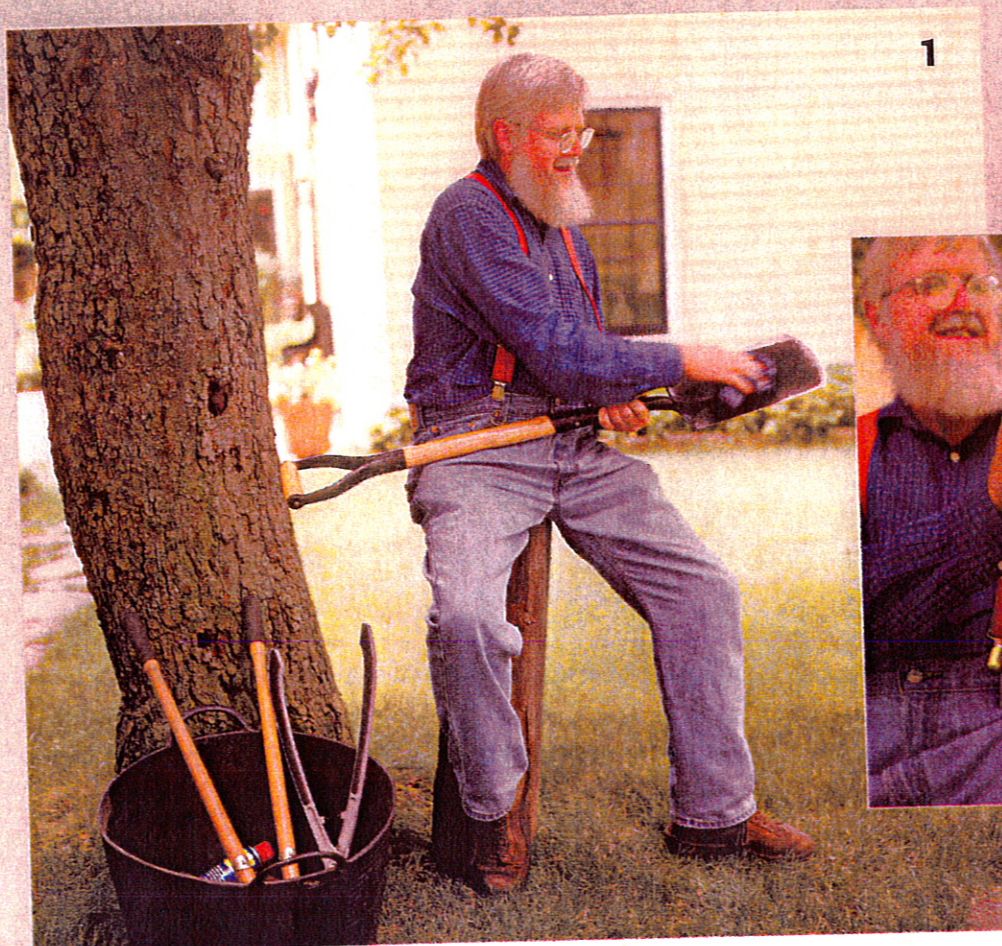
With the exception of the snow blower and perhaps a chain saw, these are ready for hibernation. Putting them to bed properly is the only way to guarantee that they will wake up and start when you want them to. The owner's manual for each (which you once had) explains long-term storage. The basics are similar. Clean off all the surfaces and spray lubricate any bare metal. For four-cycle engines, run the engine until it is warm and then drain and replace the oil and clean the air filter. Then either run the engine until it is out of gas or add gasoline stabilizer to any remaining fuel. For two-cycle engines, you get to skip

# Everything



## Smooth Moves, Sharp Edges

"Sharpness is nice in any tool, even a blunt-edged one," says Roger Swain. Clean and sharpen your hardworking tools at season's end in three easy steps.



the oil change. Don't forget to sharpen the lawn mower's blade.

Once all the engines have been serviced they can be put away. Again the emphasis should be on dryness, not accessibility. We pack ours all together just as tightly as possible, a mass of interlocking wheels and handles.

### CHEMICALS

Whether their approach is conventional, organic, or PMO ("pretty much organic"), gardeners invariably find themselves with partial containers of various toxins. Ac-

cording to the labels, these should all be stored in a cool dry place. Whatever the level of toxicity, the best location is out of easy reach (ideally in a child-proof cabinet). Write the date of purchase on the front of the container. By statute the contents have to be effective for at least two years after purchase. Since there is no easy way to dispose of the material besides applying it, dating teaches you not to buy more than you can use.

Unused fertilizer should be stored where it won't get wet and cake. Synthetic fertilizers, especially those that contain calcium

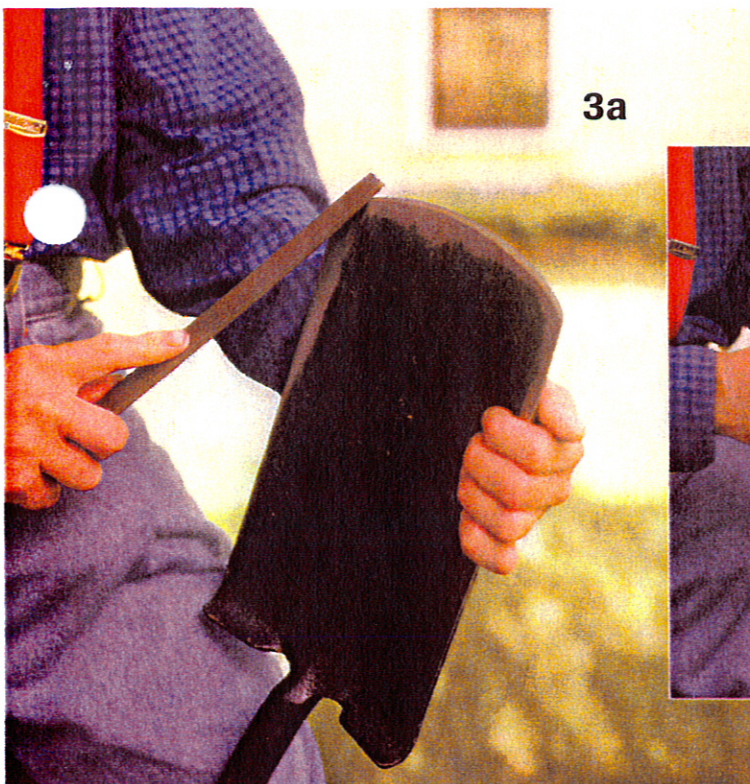
nitrate or ammonium nitrate, are hygroscopic and will absorb moisture right out of the air unless they are tightly wrapped in plastic. But any fertilizer is subject to leaching and nutrient loss if it gets damp.

### IRRIGATION

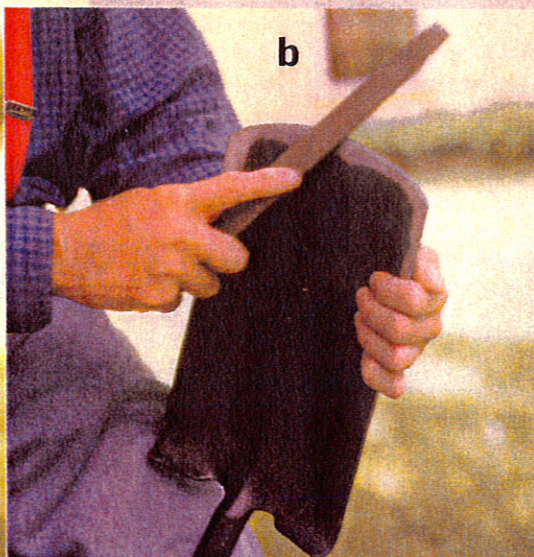
Hoses should all be drained and coiled. Tying them with short lengths of twine will keep one coil from tangling with the next. Nozzles, valves, and other attachments are best stored together nearby. Don't leave water to freeze in pumps. I add antifreeze to one of ours (which then re-



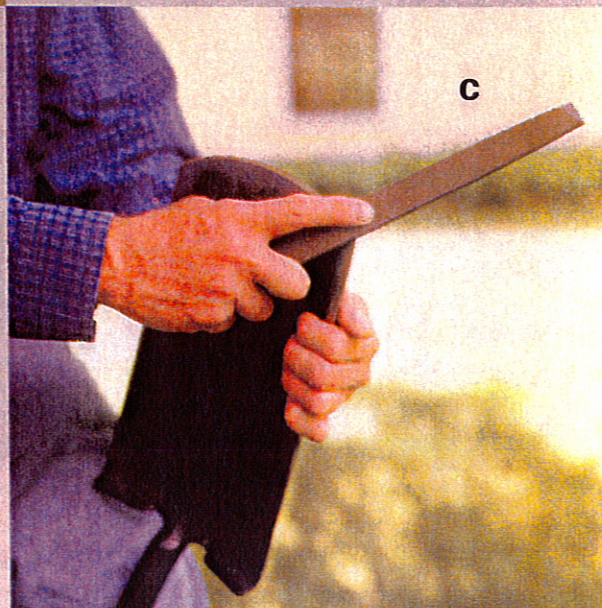
3a



b



c



**1. Scrape and scrub away all soil left on the shovel's blade before sharpening. Use water only if necessary.**

**2. Once the surface has dried, coat the bare metal with a layer of spray lubricant.**

**Dress the edge of the shovel with a bastard mill file (shown) or a bench grinder. Start with the file point resting against the near corner of the shovel's blade (a). Slide the file across the blade with an upward motion (b), so that when you finish the base of the file rests against the blade's far corner (c). This allows you to control the file better and create a sharper edge.**

quires flushing out in the spring). Another we simply bring into the house to keep from freezing.

#### POTS AND POTTING MIX

Most of the plants we buy these days are container grown, which leaves us with an empty pot after planting. These pots can be reused for one's own transplants or for divisions that are to be shared. The empty containers need only to be cleaned and stacked

and put away. A scrub brush and soapy water will clean them. If you want sterility, a brief dip in a five percent solution of Clorox

in water will suffice.

With peat moss and peat-based potting soils, it's excessive dryness that you have to worry about. Unopened bags typically contain 50 percent moisture; once you open them that percentage can drop. If the moisture content gets below 10 percent, the material becomes virtually impossible to re-wet. Tightly roll up the tops of opened bags to prevent moisture from escaping.

As for those empty plastic sacks that once held peat moss or other bulk materials, they are much sturdier than any house-


hold garbage bag, and should definitely be saved for reuse.

You know that you have done everything when everything is in its place, the watering cans on one shelf, the bamboo stakes neatly bundled in one corner. Would that it could all stay this way. Alas, someone will take down a shovel and not return it to its hook, someone will spill a bag of ground limestone and not sweep it up. Do not expect otherwise. Order is as ephemeral as open space. If your chemist father didn't tell you, entropy always increases. **H**



SHARP PRUNERS

NOT FOR PUBLIC REPRODUCTION



# Sharpening Pruners

Ten minutes spent with a diamond file and your blades will cut like new

by Melissa LeVangie

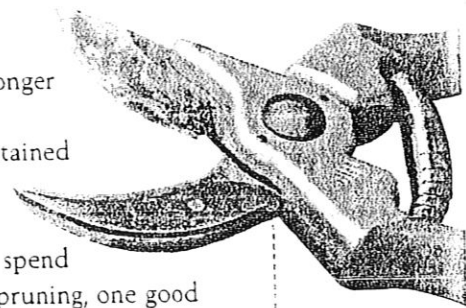
As a certified arborist and self-proclaimed tree nerd, I always keep my pruning tools in good working order, and with hand pruners, this means keeping them sharp. A sharp pair of hand pruners makes cleaner cuts that heal more efficiently, resulting in a healthier plant better able to fight disease, insect infestation, and natural stresses with strength and vigor.

I find the best way to sharpen pruners is with diamond files. I prefer them to whetstones because they are easy to use, even for a novice. You'll need three levels of coarseness (known as grits): coarse, fine, and extrafine. The files are

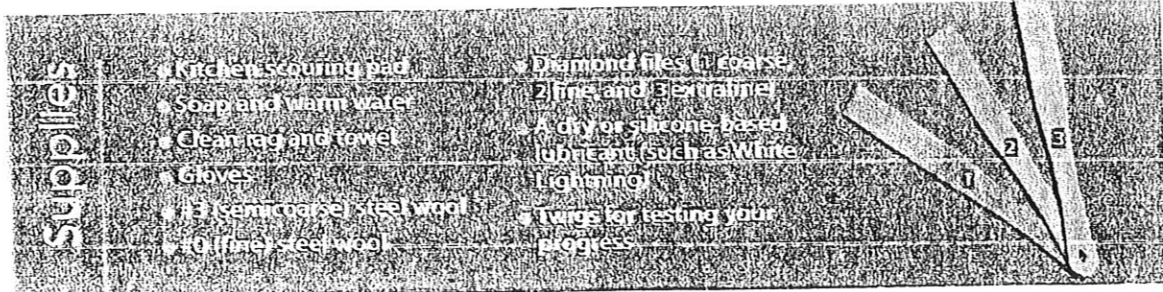
inexpensive and will last longer than your pruners.

Well-used but well-maintained pruners should only need sharpening every six weeks. For gardeners who spend barely four hours a week pruning, one good sharpening a year may be adequate.

It takes only about 10 minutes to sharpen hand pruners in relatively good condition. The more regularly you maintain your pruners, the faster the sharpening chore goes. And keep in mind that learning how to sharpen hand pruners is not rocket science. It just takes a little patience and practice.

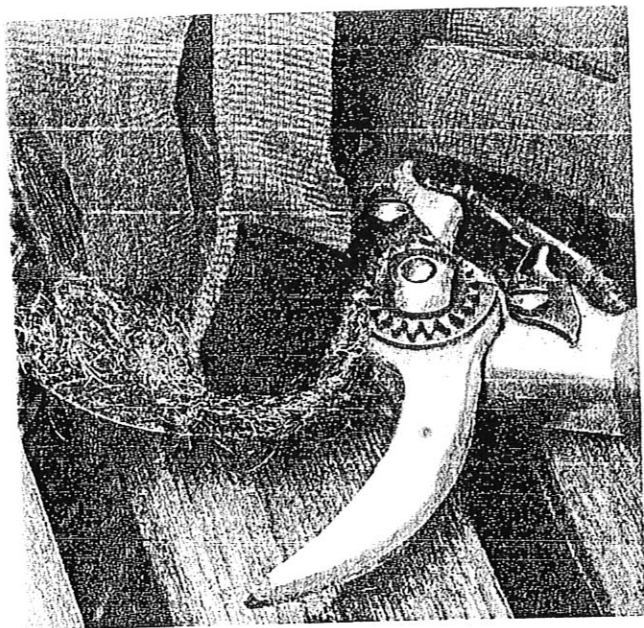


DULL PRUNERS





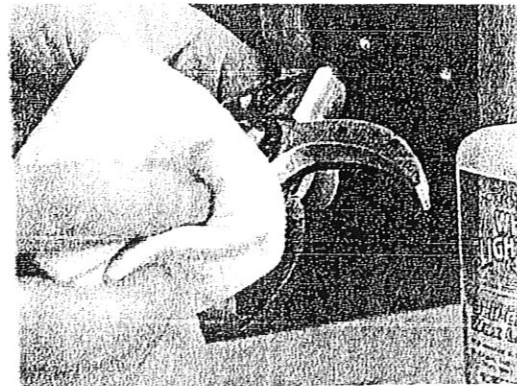
## 1. START WITH A GOOD CLEANING



If the cutting surface is grimy, it will pass roughly over the hook and not cut cleanly, even if the blade is sharp.

• **CLEAN** With a scouring pad and a little warm, soapy water, scrub off all the sap, dried plant bits, and other gunk, and wipe the blades dry.

• **REMOVE RUST** Use the coarse steel wool to remove rust and any tough matter that remains (photo, left). Then move on to the finer steel wool to restore the sheen of the metal.



## 3. FINISH WITH LUBRICANT

After I'm satisfied with the sharpness of my blade, I apply a dry or silicone-based lubricant to repel water and to hinder rust and oxidation (photo, above). Once a year, I apply a product made for lubricating bicycle chains. Intermittently throughout the year, I will lightly coat the blades with olive oil, which keeps dirt and other materials from harming the pruners without drying or becoming sticky—and it's a natural product.

## 2. GET THE ANGLE AND MOTION RIGHT

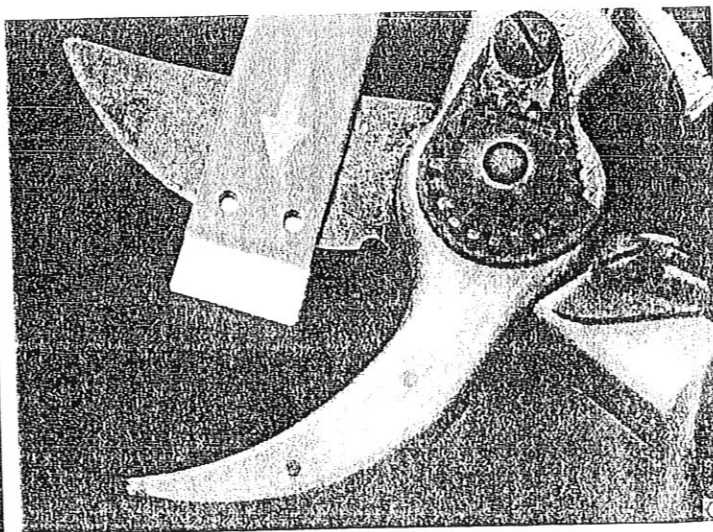
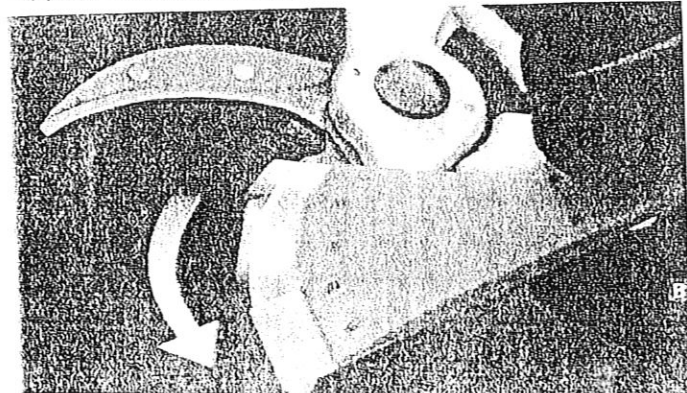
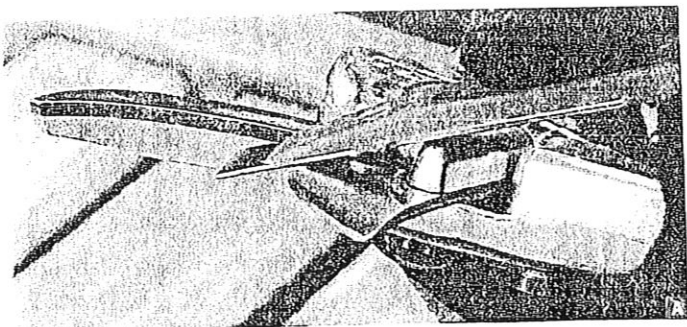
Begin with the coarsest file and progress to the finest for the best edge. Before you use any of the files, pat them with a moist cloth. The water will keep the file from clogging with the tiny bits of metal you'll be removing from the blade.

• **START WITH THE COARSE FILE**, holding it at the same angle as the beveled cutting edge (usually between 10 degrees and 20 degrees) (photo A). Starting at the inside of the blade, use moderate pressure and draw the file toward the tip in a curved motion that follows the shape of the blade (photo B). This motion is easy, safe, and sharpens the entire blade evenly. For

well-maintained pruners, 10 to 20 draws with the diamond sharpener is usually sufficient, but poorly maintained pruners may need about 40 to 50 passes.

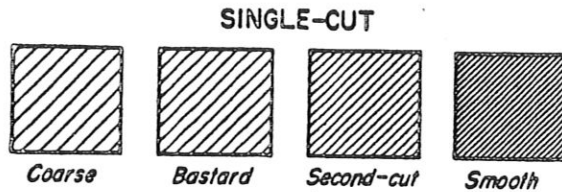
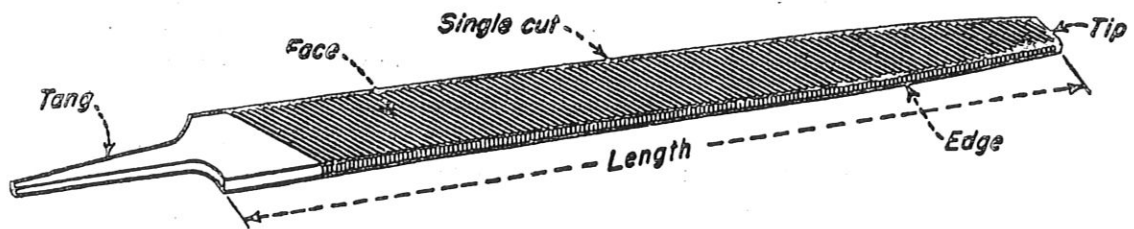
• **SWITCH TO FINER GRITS** to further sharpen the beveled edge. Use the fine file first, followed by the extrafine, using the same number of passes with each as you used with the coarse file.

• **FINISH BY REMOVING BURRS** by running the extrafine file over the back side of the blade a few times (photo C).



Melissa LeVangie is a certified arborist and co-owner of Trees Near England in South Hadley, Mass.





### THE USE OF FILES IN HAND TOOL MAINTENANCE

The file is a tool made of heat treated high carbon steel that is somewhat brittle. It should not be used as a prying or striking tool as this could cause it to fracture and discharge small sharp pieces resulting in bodily injury. Files and handles may be purchased assembled or as separate items. As with the use of all tools, safety precautions are important:

- Leather or other non-cloth gloves should be worn when filing to prevent filings from becoming embedded in the hands.
- Never push the file toward the cutting edge of the tool being filed.

The item to be filed must be clean, dry, and free of paint or other soft materials that may become lodged in the file teeth and cause breakage of the file teeth.

This discussion is limited to the single cut flat file which may be identified as a mill file or a machinist file. The 8" and 10" files are the most appropriate length for sharpening garden tools.

- Firmly hold the tool to be filed or clamp it on a workbench to allow the filing process to proceed without the tool moving.
- When the tool being filed has a cutting edge (angle) established, place the file on that edge. Make sure the file is flat on the angle. Apply light pressure and push the file at an angle across and away from the cutting edge.
- A 10" file of coarse cut or bastard cut can be used where considerable pressure can be applied on the file for rapid removal of material where a smooth finish is not required.
- An 8" file of second cut or smooth cut can be used with light pressure to produce a smooth finish on the cutting edge.
- An 8" smooth cut should be used on thin materials.
- Files should be cleaned immediately after use. A file brush or small steel or bronze brush may be used. Pass the bristles of the brush parallel to the teeth of the file while applying light pressure to remove the filings.
- Store the file in a clean, dry location.

Compiled by John H. Dickens, York County Master Gardener.

Resource: Machinery's Handbook 15<sup>th</sup> Edition. Industrial Press. New York, NY.